



K's Story: from persistent absence to belonging and self-regulation

Case study

Kirk Hallam Community Academy is a medium-sized 11–18 academy, situated in the Erewash area of Derbyshire. Its students are drawn from both rural and urban areas with Year 7s arriving from 15 local primary schools. They joined EmpathyLab's Schools programme in summer 2024.

The school applied EmpathyLab's approach to improve behaviour and attendance, weaving it into their bespoke SEMH provision offering structured relational support and using it to foster emotional understanding and self-regulation.

K's story is a powerful testament to the impact this work can have on students finding it hard to access learning through school, including an increase in attendance from 85% to 99%, reflecting greater motivation and belonging:

- Significant reduction of negative behaviour points, with no classroom removals from his most challenging subject
- Development of independent self-regulation skills, recognising dysregulation early and seeking support proactively

K's story

K is on the SEND register with a diagnosis of ADHD. During Autumn term 2025, as he arrived in Year 7 at Kirk Hallam, he experienced significant difficulties managing his behaviour for learning, resulting in a high number of C2 removals and a total of -50 behaviour points.

His challenges were particularly evident in Science where he accumulated -13 negatives linked to dysregulation, low focus and difficulty sustaining attention.

Alongside behaviour concerns, K's attendance declined to 84.78%, placing him in the persistently absent category. This level of absence affected his ability to maintain routines, build relationships and access consistent learning experiences.

In response, K's Head of Year referred him to The Hive, a bespoke SEMH provision within Kirk Hallam Community Academy, offering structured relational support.

Within this environment, K accessed weekly Reading4Empathy sessions, with empathy based approaches embedded across all Hive practice. Applying EmpathyLab's approach, texts were deliberately linked to emotions, perspective taking and Book Talk questions, ensuring that empathy-based reflection became a consistent thread in provision.

The intention was to provide a safe, predictable space where K could explore the underlying factors influencing his behaviour, practise alternative strategies and rebuild confidence in his ability to succeed.

Impact of Reading 4 Empathy on K's progress

The R4E programme became a central driver of K's progress. Through carefully selected texts and guided discussion, K was able to explore emotions, social cues and the perspectives of others in a structured, low-pressure environment. This had several key effects:

- **Improved emotional understanding:** R4E enabled K to recognise and label emotions, helping him transfer this understanding to his own personal interactions.
- **Reduction in conflict:** by practising perspective taking, K developed a clearer understanding of how his actions affected peers, leading to fewer friendship related incidents.
- **Greater self-regulation:** R4E discussions helped K identify early signs of dysregulation and apply strategies modelled through the texts.
- **Increased empathy:** K began to step into someone else's shoes, which significantly reduced anger responses and improved his ability to resolve issues calmly.

Quantifiable Improvements Following R4E and Hive Support

K's behaviour and engagement data show a marked improvement following his referral and participation in R4E:

- **His negative behaviour points reduced** from -50 in the Autumn term to -20 across the whole school for the Spring term.
- In the Spring term Science, his most challenging subject, negatives reduced from -13 to just -4, with **no classroom removals**. The strategies learned, particularly through R4E, were successfully transferred into mainstream lessons.

Attendance Improvements

K's attendance rose to **99.04% in Spring**, bringing his YTD figure to 91.46% and rising.

This improvement reflects **increased motivation, confidence and a stronger sense of belonging**. These outcomes are strongly supported by the relational consistency and empathy-based approaches embedded in The Hive.

Development of Independent Self-Regulation

Alongside quantitative data, K has shown **significant growth in his ability to self-regulate**. He now recognises when he is becoming dysregulated and independently seeks support from a trusted adult before behaviours escalate. This demonstrates that he is internalising the emotional literacy and empathy strategies practised through R4E and applying them independently within the main school environment.

